

Popham House, Scarsdale,  
Westchester County,  
New York.

HABS No. 4-103 HABS  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

District No. 4  
Southern New York State

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Wm. Dewey Foster, District Officer,  
25 West 45th Street, New York City.

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THE POPHAM RESIDENCE  
No. 1015 Post Road, Scarsdale, Westchester Co., N.Y.

Location and Name

This old mansion stands on the south side of Fox Meadows, a few rods west of the Post Road to New York (called locally the White Plains Road) in the Village of Scarsdale, Westchester County, N. Y. It is in a small valley surrounded by a grove of locust trees which have given it the name of "The Locusts". Only a few hundred feet northeast of it is the old Varian tavern known as the Wayside Inn (now the Scarsdale Public Library), which has been separately surveyed and described in the Historic American Buildings Survey.\*

The residence, one of the largest and finest in America that have survived since the Revolution, retains the name of its first owner and occupant, Major William Popham, in whose family it remained until bought in 1907 by its present owner, Mrs. Lawrence Dunham. This year it attains a century and a half of existence, and yet remains one of the most picturesque in appearance and location in a village famous for beautiful country homes. It is an excellent example of the thorough building methods employed in the latter part of the eighteenth century.

Its Date and First Owner

Scharf, in his Hist. of Westchester Co. (1886), Vol. I, p. 680, gives 1784 as the year when Major Popham built it. A biographical study of the Major's career, written from careful research by Thomas J. Harris, M.D., of Scarsdale, and published in The Quarterly Bulletin of the Westchester Co. Hist. Soc., Vol. IV, no. 2 (April, 1929), pp. 25-28, places the date between the close of the Revolution (1783) and 1790. The life of Major Popham is an index of the political and social history of his time in America. Although born in Ireland (in Brandon, County

\*See project 4-104.

Cork, Sept. 19, 1756), he came to this country with his parents when only nine years old. Residing first in New Delaware, he attended Princeton College and became one of the outstanding patriots of the Revolution. The friend and companion of Washington, he took part in the battle of Long Island, where he captured a British officer. He was also in the battles of White Plains and Brandywine, and served on the staffs of General James Clinton and General Sullivan. He recorded in his orderly-book the detailed Headquarters report of the Arnold treason.

Major Popham came to Scarsdale at the end of the war, Dr. Harris says. He took up the practice of law and was for many years clerk of the Court of Exchequer. He married the daughter of Richard Morris, the second Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of New York, who bought a house in Scarsdale and came there to live in 1790 upon his retirement from the bench. Dr. Harris concludes from these circumstances that Major Popham built his residence between 1783 and 1790. The Morris house, as well as the Popham house, is still standing.

Major Popham lived to be 96 years old, and at his death was the seventh President General of the National Society of the Cincinnati.

Mag. of Am. Hist., Vol. X, p. 183.

Scharf says that Major Popham lived in this mansion until 1835, and then his son, "the late William Sherbrooke Popham". After him, the Major's grandson, Lewis C. Popham, "now [1886] occupies the homestead".

Further historical interest attaches to the house, as reported by Scharf, in the visits there of Hamilton, Burr, and possibly Lafayette. J. Fenimore Cooper used this residence as the prototype for the home of the Wharton family in the first chapter of "The Spy". (See Scharf's

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and Dr. Harris' accounts). Mrs. Dunham, the present owner, says that James MacNeill Whistler spent his vacation there during his course at West Point, and completed a number of works of art in a room in the attic.

### Architectural Features

When Mrs. Dunham bought the house and part of the land of the old estate in 1907, she became the first owner outside the Popham family in nearly a century and a quarter. The house had been remodelled in the Victorian era, but the Dunhams restored it in 1910. The architect of the restoration was D. Everett Waide of New York.

As viewed today it is distinctly late Colonial in style. At the time Miss Morris married Major Popham it was far better than the average residence. It appears interpretive of a high degree of civilization, - the home of people of position and some means. It was planned for the comfortable and gracious standards of living of such folk of that period.

The house is three stories high in the main part and two in the extension, with basement under both parts. It is of frame construction, originally covered with wide horizontal siding which was in turn covered at a recent date with sawn cedar shingles laid double thickness. Most of the framing is original, - full braced, of hand-adzed timbers which probably were entirely concealed originally as now by lath and plaster except in the attic.

The central entrance hall, spaciouly suggestive of hospitality, was flanked on either side by the living and dining rooms, library and (when built) a bed room. The arches in the hall and the rear hall door to the terrace are originals. The kitchens were in the basement where to this day are found clear traces of the old ovens.

On the second story, reached by a comfortable open stairway, there is a wide sunny hall, flanked by the four bed rooms. The present stairway is entirely modern. A smaller stairway leads to three attic bed rooms, the northwesterly one of which, as pointed out by Mrs. Dunham, was occupied by Whistler.

Each of the principal rooms of the first and second stories is equipped with a fireplace. The mantels of wood, with the exception of that in the living room, are said to be the original mantels. At the time of the restoration they were found in the attic. These mantels are of interesting Colonial design, and with such original trim as still remains are indicative of a high degree of refinement and good taste. (From field-notes of the architects of the present survey).

"Both within and without", as Scharf observed, "the old mansion is charming in its suggestions of the early days of our national life, and with its near neighbors, the Varian and the Morris homesteads, forms a picture vividly remindful of the past".

Written, April 7, 1934, by

*Thomas W. Hotchkiss*

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*Reviewed 1936, H.C.F.*

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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An addendum to  
Popham House  
Scarsdale, New York  
in HABS Catalog (1941)

Location:

1015 Post Road, Scarsdale, Westchester  
County, New York

Present Owner  
and Occupant:

Mr. and Mrs. Robert Abramson

Architectural  
Changes:

Removal of French doors from front porch.  
Addition of shutters on all windows.

Information provided by: John Zukowsky  
Architectural Historian  
Hudson River Museum  
Yonkers, New York 10701  
March 1975